

American Desert Bighorn Sheep in Utah



Desert Bighorn Sheep

Desert bighorn sheep symbolize the rugged spirit of the American West. Living in rocky desert canyons, they, peccary, and deer are the only native, hoofed animals now surviving in the harshest areas of our southwestern deserts. However, poor habitat conditions, lack of water, and human disturbance have caused desert bighorn sheep populations to drop from several hundred thousand to less than 16,000 over the last 150 years.

Bighorn sheep, named by early pioneers, are best known for the rams' huge horns. The horns grow in a tight circle and can weigh up to 30 pounds. They are not shed each year like antlers; in fact, a ram's age can be determined by the growth rings on his horns. The ewes' horns are smaller, more slender, and more spiked than the rams'. They curve back slightly and only grow to about 12 inches.

The hooves of the bighorns have two toes separated by a soft central pad, which enables them to grasp jagged rocks. These special hooves permit them to scramble and zigzag over steep, craggy cliffs in the rocky areas where few other large animals can live. In addition, their springy bodies are well suited to leaping up or dropping down a nearly vertical rock, or barely pushing off narrow outcroppings of "bald" desert mountains with little vegetation.

Desert bighorns are smaller than their mountain cousins — the rams typically weigh about 160 pounds, and the ewes, 105 pounds. They have a thin, buff-gray coat which is similar in texture to that of a deer or elk. This coat helps to regulate their body temperature during the cold nights and hot days on the desert.

Keen vision enables the bighorns to protect themselves from predators — they can see up to 5 miles away! With their amber-yellow eyes on the sides of their heads, bighorns can see behind themselves. Their acute senses of hearing and smell also warn them of attacks from predators, such as mountain lions and coyotes.

Life Cycle — Mating season usually occurs in late summer. Older rams will occasionally hold head-butting contests to win the right to mate with ewes. With about 10 yards separating them, their ears back and heads lowered, they run forward, lunging and smashing their horns together in a violent crash that echoes up to a mile away. Their strong horns, skulls, and necks act as a shock absorber against the impact. The crash may stun the animals, but with a shake of their heads the rams are ready to back up and repeat the charge. The rams grunt, snort, and kick each other with their front legs. These contests may last for hours, until one ram backs off, drops from exhaustion, or is knocked out cold.

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The ewes mature and begin mating at about age 3. Most ewes bear only one lamb a year, but some occasionally have twins. Lambs are born in late winter on high, narrow slopes, safe from predators and adjacent to water and vegetation. Ewes will only tend to their own young — an orphaned lamb is left to die.

The lambs can walk after only a few hours and can run and jump within days. As they get older, lambs play games like “follow-the-leader” and “king of the mountain.” They also fight and challenge each other in competitions of strength and agility.

Ewes typically travel in bands with their new lambs and 1- and 2-year-old offspring. At about age 3, young rams leave these groups to travel alone or in small bands.

Older rams leave their mates after the lambs are born, travel in bachelor bands during the spring and early summer, and then rejoin ewes in time for the next mating season.

Survival — Desert bighorn sheep generally stay in the same area for their entire lives, which rarely exceed 10 years. They live where their ancestors lived and return annually to the same location for mating and giving birth. Herds may number more than a hundred animals, but most are smaller.

The sheep eat a variety of grasses, shrubs, and other plants containing moisture during the winter season. During hot, dry, desert days, the bighorns rely on good water supplies and get supplemental moisture from water-holding plants like cacti. Having no upper front teeth, they must hold and mash vegetation between their lower front teeth and the horny pad of their upper front jaws, jerking their heads to break off vegetation.

Competition for forage between bighorns and livestock, loss of water supplies, and disease have all been factors contributing to the decrease in population of desert bighorns since the 1800s. More recently,

encroachment by humans upon bighorn habitat has become a growing problem. Poorly designed wire fences can also result in injury to bighorns, and poaching continues to be a problem in some areas.

Bighorns Need Help

Eighty percent of desert bighorn habitat — nearly 9 million acres — is in six western states on public land managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). For the last two decades, BLM has worked with State agencies and private groups to develop water sources, improve vegetation conditions, and protect habitat areas from human disturbance.

The key to preserving this American treasure is to improve its habitat. Additional actions undertaken by bighorn enthusiasts, BLM, and State wildlife management agencies include reintroducing bighorn sheep into ranges they previously inhabited.

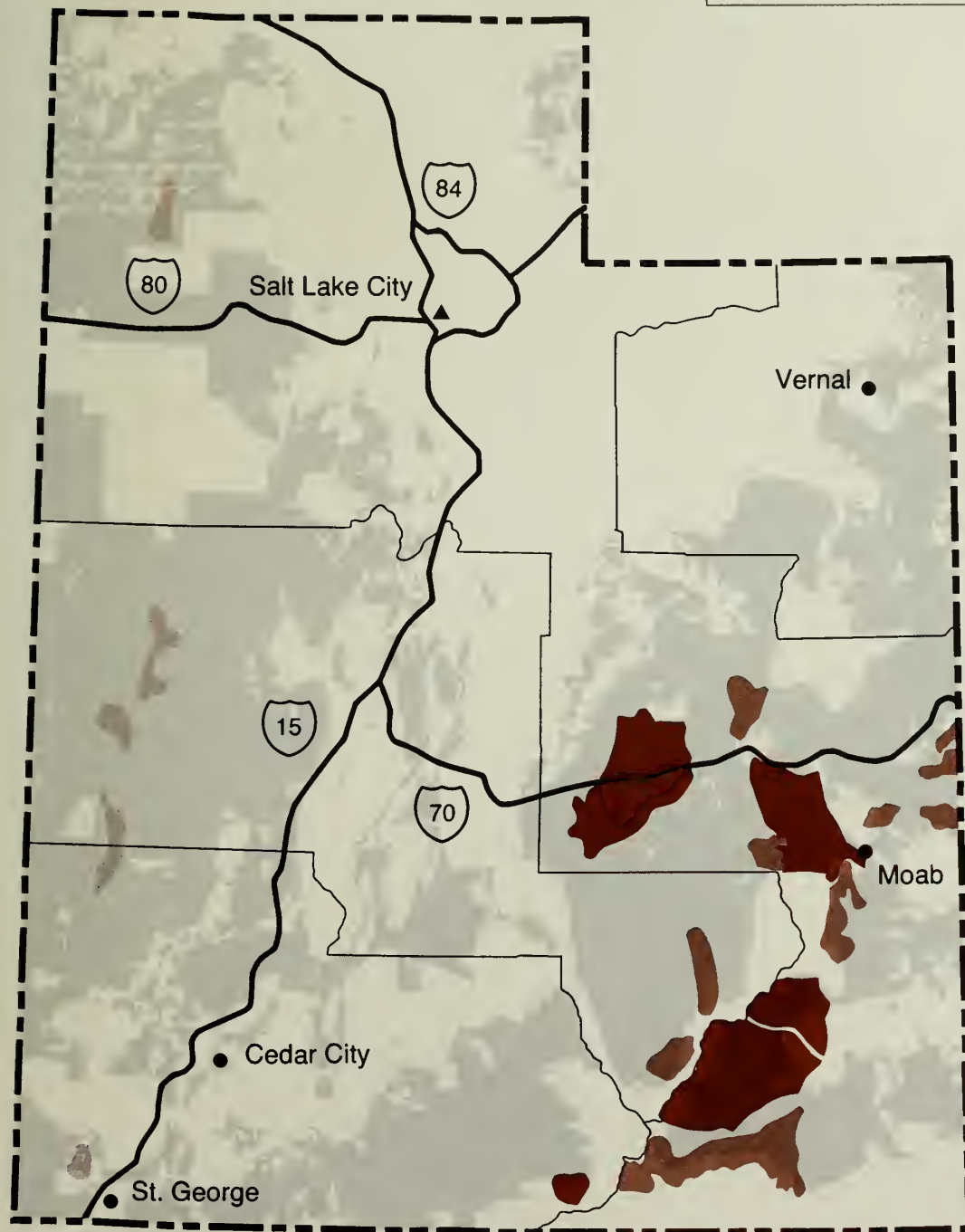
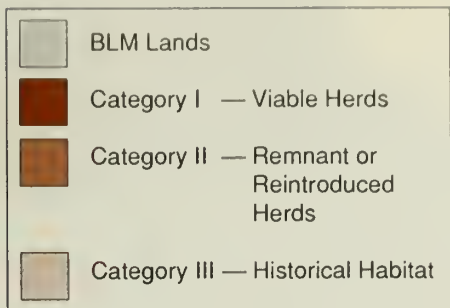
Because the desert bighorn is more likely to survive when surface water is available, the promotion of suitable water supplies is a primary effort of BLM and its volunteers. The construction of artificial water catchments, such as guzzlers, ensures storage of winter runoff, which is then available during critical summer months.

Managing vegetation around waterholes is also important. Water-hungry shrubs are discouraged in order to increase the flow and access of water. In addition to ensuring adequate water, these critical areas must be protected from human encroachment to allow bighorns to use available water sources without fear.

Other BLM efforts to improve bighorn habitat include: management of livestock grazing, building safe fences, regulating excessive recreation near sensitive habitat, and managing populations of competing animals.

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How You Can Help

In 1989, BLM published its "Rangewide Plan for Managing Habitat of Desert Bighorn Sheep on Public Lands." The goal of the plan is to recover populations of desert bighorn in six states — Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, and Utah. Each state will develop a more specific plan to establish local objectives within the scope of the Rangewide Plan.

Petroglyphs throughout southern Utah document that a multitude of bighorn sheep once roamed the state. A number of factors caused the decline in bighorn population to an apparent all time low of 200 in the 1950's. The population of the sheep is now on the rise, due to BLM's increased management of bighorn habitat.

In addition to improved habitat management, transplants and reintroductions of sheep have also played an important role in population growth. These efforts were jointly accomplished by BLM, Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, and the National Park

Service. The majority of the transplant stock for the projects has come from the Canyonlands National Park, with additional stock coming from Glen Canyon National Recreation Area and BLM lands in the Potash and Red Canyon areas. Funding by these agencies has been enhanced by the bidding for one sheep hunting permit each year since 1980; minimum bid is \$20,000.

BLM in Utah funded a long-term bighorn research project at Utah State University beginning in 1980. The initial study concentrated on the behavior of sheep in response to human interference, while studies in 1988 focused on lamb mortality.

Another successful tool for habitat recovery in Utah is the challenge cost share program. Since 1985, Congress has provided "cost share" funding for desert bighorn projects, whereby the Federal government matches gifts of money, material, and labor donated by private individuals and organizations.

The bighorn program remains focused on opening potential habitat for full use by these magnificent desert animals. Additionally, there is a continuing and growing need to maintain those water developments and other habitat improvements already constructed. Increased public involvement and support are needed and welcome. To find out what you can do, contact any of the agencies or groups listed below.

Bureau of Land Management
Utah State Office
324 South State Street, UT-932
Salt Lake City, Utah 84111-2303
Phone 801-539-4055

Utah Division of Wildlife Resources
1596 West, North Temple
Salt Lake City, Utah 84116
Phone 801-530-1245

Foundation for North American Wild Sheep
720 Allen Avenue
Cody, Wyoming 82414
Phone 307-527-6261

Canyonlands Wildlife Federation
P.O. Box 402
Moab, Utah 84532

Copies of the Rangewide Plan are available from your local BLM office.